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FORT CAROLINE, CRADLE OF AMERICAN FREEDOM

by CHARLES E. BENNETT, M.C.

ALONG THE southern bank of the St. Johns River in northeastern Florida stand a wooded bluff and adjoining shorelands which may well be considered the birthplace of American ideals and freedom; or, at very least, the cradle of American ideals in the distant years of 1564 and 1565, and the beginning of the first permanent settlement of our country. The United States government is now, in 1956, establishing at the site what will be called Fort Caroline National Memorial. It is expected that it will be open to visitors by the early summer of 1957. Although the history of St. Johns Bluff, as the area is generally designated, stretches across the centuries from 1562 with almost uninterrupted activities of significance to modern America, its history is little known today outside of Florida and specialists in this particular period of history. The establishment of the memorial will undoubtedly open wide the doors of this historic period to the minds of many Americans who previously have given it less thought than it deserved.

St. Johns Bluff rises abruptly, about 70 feet, above the waters of the St. Johns, approximately five miles from where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean. You can look northeastward over the St. Johns to Fort George Island, which is the site of an early 17th century Spanish mission (ruins on Ft. George are said by some historians to be remnants of this mission), the location of one of Oglethorpe's headquarters (a building of which is still standing), and the place where the buildings are still in use which once were used for the residential seat of John McIntosh in his 19th century revolutionary efforts against Spanish rule and for the later slave importation activities of Zephaniah Kingsley. Many of the points of interest on Fort George Island will soon be opened as Kingsley Plantation State Park. You can look eastward over marshes and distant forests to see the Atlantic Ocean as a misty horizon. To the south and west stretch beautiful woodlands. Out of sight along the St. Johns lies the city of Jacksonville (10 or 15 miles inland).

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This spectacular promontory bows its head to no land in America; for here transpired some of our most important history. Its heavy subtropical growth of live oak, holly, magnolia, palm and palmetto hardly whisper of the idealism, romance and tragedy that have made it a land which all Americans should cherish.

The bluff with its adjoining acres is the very cradle of the American tradition of personal freedom. The curtain rose on its history when Jean Ribault, a Frenchman, came to the St. Johns River on May 1, 1562, in an effort to find a suitable place to locate a colony of Europeans, mostly French Huguenots, who desired to escape from the religious massacres and other oppressions of Europe of the 16th century.

When Ribault and his men set foot on the northern banks of the river in May, 1562, and offered there a prayer, they were the first people to come to what is now the United States for freedom; and their prayer was the first prayer ever offered on our shores by such idealists. They then crossed the river and erected a column on the south side in memory of their acts and to foretell their return. Before leaving the river valley they inspected the bluff as a possible location for the colony. They then sailed out into the Atlantic and northward to what is now South Carolina. There they erected another monument, to mark the limits of their future habitation. This first exploratory trip resulted in no permanent colony, included no women and was not provisioned for permanent occupancy. A small garrison of men stayed near Port Royal, South Carolina, for a time and then sailed for France.

Returning to Europe, Ribault was soon an involuntary but temporary guest in the prisons of Queen Elizabeth (in the Tower of London). There he wrote a book about his findings in the New World. So, it was another who led the actual colonization movement in 1564. He was Rene Laudonniere, who had accompanied Ribault in 1562.

Laudonniere led a group of about 300 men and women to the St. Johns, arriving at its shores on June 24, 1564. Perhaps never has our land welcomed a more diverse group. About their only point in common was their desire for freedom. Some wore the gilded armor and brightly colored clothes befitting their high

rank. Others were clad in simple clothes which indicated the manual labor to which they were accustomed. They were not all Frenchmen; and they included, among a predominately Protestant population, many Catholics. Their movement had been approved by John Calvin, the religious reformer, and by Charles IX, Catholic King of France. There were at the time no other settlements of white people in North America, north of Mexico.

The site chosen for habitation was the St. Johns bluff area, at which they arrived on June 25, 1564. They named their settlement La Caroline, after the King of France. The name La Caroline was gradually and then permanently changed to Fort Caroline. The choice of terrain was no doubt made on account of the commanding view from the bluff and for the ability of the land to sustain life, the colonists finding it to be productive of corn, potatoes and grapes.

Ribault has said of this land that it was "the fairest, frutefullest and pleasantest of all the worlde" and that "the sight of the faire meadows is a pleasure not able to be expressed with tongue". Laudonniere said of it "the place was so pleasant that melancholias would be forced to change their nature" as they viewed it.

The colonists built a triangular fort in the flat land to the west of the bluff. Here they flew the French flag and set their ponderous cannon marked with the French coat of arms. Moats were dug on all sides and an impressive gate constructed and decorated with the arms of France and of Admiral Gaspard Coligny, a backer of, but not a participant, in the settlement. Buildings for munitions were set up inside the fort, and sentinels kept watch there and on the bluff. Some habitations were erected inside but there were many houses built outside the fort. The fortifications and houses were chiefly built of logs and earth. However, we are advised that the French also made brick and mortar for their houses from rock or clay found near by.

The colonists came supplied with seeds, tools and domestic animals. There were horses, sheep, asses, chickens, hogs, cattle and dogs. Many of the animals were probably consumed as food, for the settlers had difficulty in raising crops in the wild new land. They dug a well and also used a somewhat distant spring, probably the present source of Shipyard Creek (to the west of the bluff).

Time keeping was by use of an hour glass and lighting was by candle and lantern. Beds were built and hammocks strung according to preference. There was a flour mill, a bakery and a blacksmith shop.

Among the settlers were carpenters, mechanics, ordnance men, blacksmiths, barbers, tailors, shoemakers and brewers, as well as an artist, a crossbow maker, an astronomer, a physician and people of various other talents.

At first there was no regularly ordained preacher and religious services were conducted by laymen. They also conducted missionary work among the Indians. The colonists had a large bell to call the people to worship. A reenforcement expedition from France later added a preacher to their number.

These people were not long-faced zealots, however. They were liberal in their views and they found pleasure in earthly pursuits as well as religious services. They enjoyed drinking the wine which they produced. A letter from one of these settlers stated: "We hope to make some wine soon, which will be rather good." It is noted once they had just produced 20 hogshead of wine. They also quickly took up the habit of smoking from the Indians and were perhaps the first white men to take up smoking as a habit. They brought many books with them and they also played cards for amusement.

They enjoyed music by a fiddler, a piano (spinet) player, drummer, trumpeters, and fifers. Long after the French control had become a thing of the past, later Floridians would hear the Indians of that neighborhood singing French songs which they had learned from their romantic French companions.

Some of the men were impatient and bored with the struggle for survival in a wild land and took to pirating the Spanish ships of the Caribbean. These were returned to the colony for trial; and we find the colonists solemnly debating and deciding the question of whether they should be shot before or after hanging.

The community practiced in considerable measure the republican and democratic principles of political freedom. Even the actual location of the settlement was decided upon by opinions being expressed and "all resolving" to live at St. Johns Bluff. We find the colonists similarly deciding on the question of whether

or not a boat should be fitted up for a voyage to France. There was some criticism from France of Laudonniere's administration, as it was thought that he sought complete independence. We find Laudonniere saying of his critics that some people criticize because they think "that by diminishing the work of others, they can add to the force of their own weak courage. That is sometimes one of the most remarkable dangers that can come to a republic."

Some of the colonists occupied themselves very largely with trading with the Indians. An interesting little story has come down to us about one youth by the name of Piere Gambie, who set himself up as a business man and trader. Gambie went to an island in the St. Johns, probably the land now called Fleming's Island and traded there with the Indian population. It was not long before he was growing rich, and married the Indian Chief's daughter and was acting as second in command among the Indians. It is said that he stayed among the Indians for about a year before he decided to return to La Caroline on a visit. On the way he was killed by an Indian with whom he had experienced difficulty before. The Indian who killed Gambie was apparently motivated by resentment from the previous dispute and by a desire to obtain the riches which the French boy achieved through his good business with the Indians.

It is recorded that at La Caroline were born 8 or 10 children, the first children of freedom seeking Americans born in what is now the United States and apparently the first recorded births of any white persons in what is now the United States.

A few of the colonists returned to Europe shortly after coming to America and a number of important visits were made to the colony. The colony was reenforced by Captain Bourdet from France in 1564, visited by Sir John Hawkins, the Englishmen, in 1565 and again reenforced by Ribault in 1565.

The visit by Sir John Hawkins was the first visit to the United States by a slave trading expedition. Hawkins, the slave trader and corsair, was sailing in the good ship *Jesus*, which was accompanied by several other boats. A sailor who accompanied Hawkins said that the expedition was getting low on water but since a fresh wind had come up "every man was contented to pinch his owne bellie, whatsoever had happened" and the result

was that the expedition eventually put into the St. Johns River for water, although Hawkins had expected to get his water supply further to the south. In speaking of the habit of smoking at the colony the sailor said:

"The Floridians when they travell, have a kinde of herbe dried, who with a cane and an earthen cup in the end, with fire, and the dried herbs put together, doe sucke thorow the cane the smoke thereof, which smoke satisfieth their hunger, and therwith they live foure or five dayes without meat or drinke, and this all the Frenchmen used for this purpose; yet they do holde opinion withall, that it causeth water and fleame to void from their stomacks."

The reenforcements brought by Ribault numbered about 600 and included both men and women. They had been with the colony but a very short time when an expedition headed by Pedro Menendez (under orders from King Philip II of Spain) made its appearance at the mouth of the St. Johns. This expedition was sent to wipe out Fort Caroline and to hold the land for Spain. Menendez first took his forces to what is now the site of St. Augustine and thereupon founded the city of St. Augustine, the oldest continuously existing city in the United States. When Menendez came, La Caroline was the only settlement of white people on the North American Continent, north of Mexico. It antedated St. Augustine by over a year, and its existence was the reason why St. Augustine was founded and thereafter maintained through the years. Previous to La Caroline, Philip II had given orders against Spanish settlement efforts north of Mexico, for several earlier efforts had resulted in costly failures.

The French and Spanish vessels approached each other in a heavy surf at the mouth of the St. Johns. Messages were exchanged. Menendez demanded surrender and received the prompt reply "I am the Admiral but sooner I prefer death." The French vessels prepared for attack but the sea was growing rougher and wind made the ships unmanageable. Without coming close enough to engage the Spanish vessels in a full battle, the French vessels were swept down the Florida coast by the tropical storm and wrecked near what is now Daytona Beach.

Menendez, knowing that Ribault and his boats were occupied in the storm, made his way to St. Augustine and from there set out over land toward La Caroline with 500 soldiers. Their road had to be cut through the jungle and underbrush and the journey took about three days. On the night before the attack on the French colony, Menendez and his men camped at a small pond which is still to be seen. About the break of day on September 20, 1565, Menendez assembled at the shore of the pond a council of his men to decide whether they should go on or whether they should turn back and leave America to the French. There were dissenters but the strong will of Menendez was able to persuade the other leaders to go forward into battle. The Spaniards made quick work of killing 142 at Fort Caroline and capturing a number of women and children and a few men, including Spanish shipwrecked sailors whom the French had given haven. Some of the early records seem to imply that Menendez was a bit tardy about ordering that women and children should be spared; and state that some infants were killed and their bodies erected on the points of pikes stuck in the ground.

A very human little story about this trip from the newly founded St. Augustine to the older La Caroline community is found in the Spanish writings. We are told that a man by the name of Juan de San Vicente was very much against Menendez making this trip to La Caroline and begged off from making the trip by telling Menendez that he had a very serious stomach ache and a hurt leg. Vicente's real motives were shown by his remarks made after the departure of Menendez when he said: "I swear to God that I am expecting the news that all our soldiers have been killed, so that we who remain here may embark on these three ships and go to the Indies, for it is not reasonable that we should all die like beasts."

It should be noted that the French at La Caroline were unprepared because of the stormy weather and the early hour of the attack. Most of the people at the fort were inexperienced in fighting or were sick. Laudonniere himself had been very ill and he escaped from the fort (with the assistance of a page boy) after he had been left for dead with his sword arm slashed. He was soon met in his flight by Nicolas le Challeux, an ancient carpenter, who marveled at his own strength in being able to leap over the wall, being strongly sustained through the fear of

the circumstances from which he was fleeing. Le Challeux, who had been on his way to work, still had in his hand his chisel, which proved helpful to him in his flight toward the sea from St. Johns Bluff.

Laudonniere was also joined in flight by an unmarried woman whose duties had been to serve the community as a nurse and to care for the chickens. Laudonniere had found her working as a waitress in a tavern in France. Admiral Coligny had doubted the propriety of taking an unmarried woman on the venture to America. Several of the colonists had asked her hand at La Caroline and she ultimately married one of them in France. In her escape from the fort she was stabbed in the breast but she recovered and accompanied the enfeebled leader in his floundering towards the sea through the marshes.

Jacques Ribault, the son of Jean Ribault, took Laudonniere and a few more of the fugitives from the colony back to France. Jacques had been anchored near the colony at the time of the onslaught. He had been deterred from entering the fray because of fear of firing on his own people. Perhaps also the acts of the Spaniards gave him little enthusiasm for the combat. It is recorded that the assailants took the eyes of the dead and flicked them from the points of their daggers in the direction of the French boats.

Jean Ribault, the father, as well as about 350 of his followers were massacred on the Florida coast at Matanzas Inlet where Menendez found them trying to get across to Anastasia Island after their shipwreck. Menendez ambiguously offered the French his mercy and then tied them in groups of 10 and slaughtered them on the beaches at Matanzas, they having delivered up to him their arms relying upon his mercy. He spared those of the French who were Catholics and also persons with particular abilities as workmen or musicians. The man who actually killed Ribault first enquired of him as to whether Ribault did not expect his soldiers to obey orders. Ribault said "yes". Then the Spaniard said "I propose to obey the orders of my commander also. I am ordered to kill you". When Ribault knew that he was to die he said: "Twenty years more or less are of little account". Then he chanted a psalm and received the dagger thrust which ended his life.

According to some early accounts, Ribault's beard and skin were sent to King Philip of Spain and his head was cut in four pieces, which were distributed on the ends of lances on each corner of the fort at St. Augustine. Menendez wrote of Ribault to Philip: "I think it a very great good fortune that this man be dead, for the King of France could accomplish more with him and fifty thousand ducats than with other men and five hundred thousand ducats; and he could do more in one year, than another in ten . . ." Menendez thus disclosed that the real purpose of the conflict was to make firm the territorial claim of Spain over France in this part of the New World, all other apparent purposes of the conflict being rather immaterial.

The combat at La Caroline between the French and the Spanish was the first international conflict of white people in what is now the United States. The road which Menendez cleared between St. Augustine and La Caroline became the first regularly and continuously used highway in what is now the United States. Menendez left 300 men at La Caroline, which he renamed San Mateo and which continued as a fort and mission settlement for a great number of years. From this San Mateo colony were sent in 1566 the first colonists to Virginia.

At St. Johns Bluff one of the earliest churches in the new world was built in 1565 by Menendez. It was constructed from the planks which had been hewn for a Huguenot boat. The Spanish arms were erected over the main gate of the fort at San Mateo where the French arms had previously been. The Spanish renamed the river "San Juan," from which the present name of St. Johns is derived. The French name had been the River of May, after the date of the discovery on May 1, 1562.

Menendez took captives at La Caroline, at Mantazas and also at Cape Canaveral, where some of those shipwrecked from Ribault's fleet had established themselves. It is probable that some of these French people, perhaps several hundred, ultimately mingled with the newcomers to Florida to become a permanent part of the American race. The records indicate that a goodly number remained in Florida for several years at least, and a recorded incident concerning one of them shows that he was still at St. Augustine over ten years after his capture. It is known that Menendez treated these French people with great kindness after the exigencies of the first few days of conflict no longer

made such treatment impossible. The author has heard of one modern Florida family tracing descent from these early French Huguenots; and more adequate records would doubtless reveal a number of modern Floridians with this blood in their veins.

In 1568, Dominique de Gourgues, a Frenchman, and probably a Catholic, borrowed money and sold most of his estate to finance an expedition to St. Johns Bluff to revenge the acts of Menendez. He took 180 men and slaughtered about 400 at San Mateo. According to the account, the De Gourgues forces, after cutting their feet in their march through the oyster shell marshes, surprised some of the Spaniards as they sat about in the sun picking their teeth after a meal. Forthwith, the French slew most of them. De Gourgues hanged some of the Spaniards, having captured them for that purpose. He tacked up a sign over their bodies that he did this to them not as to Spaniards, but as to robbers and murderers.

The inspiration for this act was a sign which Menendez is said to have placed over Frenchmen whom he hanged at Fort Caroline, reading that this was done not unto Frenchmen but unto heretics.

An old Indian woman who expressed herself as being able to die in peace now that the French had returned, must have had but a short satisfaction, for Spain quickly rebuilt and re-occupied San Mateo upon the speedy departure of De Gourgues. During his brief stay, the Indians sang for him hymns that they had learned from La Caroline, including "Happy Is One To Be A Volunteer For God."

In 1586 most of St. Augustine's population withdrew to San Mateo under the attack of Sir Francis Drake, the Englishman who burned St. Augustine in that year. San Mateo itself only escaped from Drake's intended attack upon it by the providentially bad weather, which prevented, or at least discouraged Drake from making his planned attack on the latter settlement. A year or so earlier a pirate vessel was captured at San Mateo by the Spanish. San Mateo is mentioned as continuing as a fort or mission in later writings, being one of the two settlements in Florida mentioned by Coreal in 1669. But activity there apparently declined for a number of years.

In the early 18th century the land fell under the control of two British generals, Governor James Moore of South Carolina,

and then General James Oglethorpe of Georgia. British forces, including highland-clad Scots, pushed to the gates of St. Augustine but were unable to conquer that city. Oglethorpe maintained his headquarters on Ft. George Island, across the river from St. Johns Bluff.

It is highly improbable that there has ever been, since the original French settlement in 1564, any considerable period of time when this St. Johns Bluff area has not been inhabited by white people.

A new impetus to life there occurred when England took over all of Florida in 1763. Tories from the English colonies in the north began settling at St. Johns Bluff in the early part of the American Revolution. By the time that England turned back Florida to Spain in 1783 a prosperous town known as St. Johns Town flourished at St. Johns Bluff. A British fort was erected on top of the bluff.

About 300 buildings at St. Johns Town gave accommodations to some 1500 inhabitants. There were taverns, a Masonic Lodge, a livery stable, a drygoods store, a hardware store and a warehouse. Water Street and Prince's Street were lined with frame houses, some of which were imposing two-story buildings. The people of St. Johns Town had slaves and engaged in active naval stores trade. They were served by a physician and a preacher. Quite often they were bothered by "banditti" and occasionally the American forces gave them some consternation by approaching the near vicinity. English troops were stationed there to man the fort on the bluff, which was protected by cannon.

When Spain took Florida back from the British in 1783 St. Johns Town was renamed St. Vincent Ferrer, which had a stormy and colorful career, following the steady growth experienced under the British regime. Semipeaceful occupation was only established by the Spanish after two outlaws, Daniel McGirt and William Bowles, had been captured and thrown into prison. These highwaymen had used the village as a headquarters for their band of marauders.

Some of the English who remained in Florida, and some others of the local inhabitants, were not content with Spanish rule and they established a "Territory of East Florida" (1812-15). John McIntosh, its director, lived on Ft. George Island. For a time the bluff fell under the sphere of influence of this organ-

ization as the army of its revolutionary government, aided by United States troops, extended a military occupation from Fernandina to considerably south of St. Johns Bluff.

The unsettled conditions in the St. Johns Bluff area in the 19th century did not encourage peaceful settlement; and St. Vincent Ferrer fell into slow decay and attracted few newcomers for a long period of time. Furthermore, Zephaniah Kingsley, one of the most successful slave importers in America acquired the bluff itself and much of the land around it in the early part of the 19th century. He imported slaves to Florida and then smuggled them across the border into the United States, which had by then made the importation of slaves illegal. Kingsley used the bluff and its adjoining slopes as a shipbuilding site. From this activity came the present name of Shipyard Creek, which empties into the St. Johns to the west of the bluff. Kingsley lived at the old McIntosh plantation on Ft. George Island. There he set up his principal wife, a Negro princess, Anna Madegigine Jai, whom he had married in Madagascar by the rituals of the natives there. She lived in the old "White House" of the Territory of East Florida and proved herself to be an able business woman and a firm mistress of her slaves. This unorthodox mingling of races in marriage did not, however, result in harmony in the lives of those involved, and Anna's descendants moved to other localities.

During the War Between the States the bluff teemed with life in the Confederate fortifications there at the top of the bluff, which were established by General Joseph Finegan of the Confederate Army. The guns of the bluff were able to keep the United States troops from coming up the river on several occasions. The engagements on September 11, and 17, 1862, resulted in some loss of life to the Confederate forces. Finally 1,573 United States troops marched overland from Mayport, being supported from the river by 10 vessels, 6 of them gun boats. They made such an alarming display that the 500 Confederates retreated and left the bluff to the Union Army on October 3, 1862. President Jefferson Davis in a letter in 1863 wrote that the loss of this "position was a serious calamity." The earthworks of the Confederate forces are still traceable today on the bluff.

In April, 1898 (during the Spanish-American War), the United States government built and occupied on this tract a coast defense concrete fort, now standing in perfect condition. Two American soldiers were killed there in preparing mines for the St. Johns River channel.

The bluff, which was the attraction for the various settlements, has still substantially the same appearance which it has had from the early times. There has been some erosion along the shore in the vicinity; but it cannot be denied that a very substantial portion of the land used by the French, and by the subsequent occupations, remains. Also a spring, probably the one mentioned in the early account of this French colony, can yet be seen. The spot where Menendez camped before his descent on La Caroline can be readily identified, this being the place where he held the council which determined the nationality of a large portion of the New World. In the vicinity, Spanish coins struck between 1516 and 1555 have been found and also a gold ring with the French fleurs-de-lis upon it. Even today one can walk along the top of the bluff and see, as reminders of the early Indian occupations, many oyster shells and bits of pottery in the sandy soil. Bullets and shot of various kinds are often picked up by picnickers there.

St. Johns Bluff, as we know it now, has the virginal beauty which was described by all the great men who touched it or who were near it in the early days. As the sailor with Hawkins said: "It flourisheth with meadow, pasture ground, with woods of Cedar and Cypress, and other sort, as better cannot be in the world." That English sailor also reported that Florida is "all the yeare long so greene, as any time in the Summer with us . . ."

So, today in this beautiful land in northeast Florida, surrounded on all sides by increasing activity, there exists this historic site which is soon to be memorialized by the United States government as the Fort Caroline National Memorial. It may be rightly termed the cradle of the American tradition of freedom, the birthplace of the first child born on our shores to this tradition, the place of the first recorded birth of a white child in what or now is the United States, the spot which marks the beginning of permanent colonization of our vast continent north of Mexico, the site of the first highway in what is now the United States, a spot fortified by more nations than any other spot in the United States, the

site of the council which decided the nationality of a large portion of the New World, and a spot which has a continuous history touching almost every phase of American development. Fort Caroline required the Spanish to establish and maintain St. Augustine and inspired the English to busy themselves in establishing the colonies at Roanoke and Jamestown. Truly, it was the first foothold of the permanent settlement of the United States. *

*On April 5, 1956, C. R. Vinten, Superintendent of Castillo de San Marcos National Monument wrote the following to Congressman Bennett:

I can report to you with very genuine pleasure that the program of planning and development at Fort Caroline National Memorial is making real progress.

The Construction program at the memorial began on February 17, this year. As of today, the entrance drive and parking area have been cleared and graded, concrete curbs and walks as well as storm sewers and water lines are installed, and the road and courtyard grading for the utility area has been completed. Road paving will begin soon.

From the standpoint of planning, the design for the Visitor Center and Maintenance Structures have been approved and in the near future we plan to advertise for bids for the construction of these buildings and their contingent utilities. Funds are available at this time to complete all major projects which now appear essential to the proper interpretation of the events which marked the beginning of permanent colonization of the vast continent north of Mexico.

The story of Fort Caroline will be told graphically in the Visitor Center, by means of maps, pictures, scaled models, and authentic specimens of military and domestic property similar to those used by both the French colonists and Indian natives of this early period. Plans for these exhibits are now being prepared by Park Service Historian Albert C. Manucy so that the exhibits may be installed as soon as the Visitor Center is ready for them.

According to the success we have experienced to date with development and planning work, the memorial should be ready for public visitation early in the summer of next year. We are looking forward to this occasion as it will represent the fulfillment of years of effort by individuals and organizations to secure national recognition of the Fort Caroline colony, which led directly to the permanent colonization of this region.